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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000739

SIPDIS

STATE FOR PRM, IO/PSC, PM/WRA, AND NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/06/2018
TAGS: PREF PBTS UNHCR PREL KHDP WI AG MO
SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: UNHCR MANEUVERING AROUND A
POLITICAL BERM

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Western Sahara Operations Director Sergio Calle-Noreno (protect) said that he had received an agreement in principle from the Government of Morocco (GOM), the Polisario, and Algeria in May to attend a conference in Geneva in July to discuss and sign an accord on allowing land crossings between Moroccan and Polisario controlled territory as part of the UN's Confidence Building Measures (CBM) program in Western Sahara. However, recent Polisario statements criticizing UN Special Representative Peter Van Walsum and threatening to reconsider participation in the Manhasset process have had a chilling effect on the May CBM thaw. Calle-Noreno has built a coalition of embassies in Rabat willing to fund the demining and other equipment necessary to facilitate land crossings and does not want to miss this window of opportunity. As a result of intensive recent advocacy on his part, all three parties have tentatively agreed to meet in Geneva under UNHCR auspices in September, but Calle-Noreno is concerned that the commitments are not firm. He urgently requested USG assistance in convincing the three parties to move forward on this issue.
End Summary.

Air Transport: Low Volume, High Cost

¶2. (C) On July 29, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Western Sahara Operations Director Sergio Calle-Norena met with PolOffs to brief the Embassy on the state and status of UNHCR's CBM program in Western Sahara. Currently, the CBMs consist of a weekly reciprocal UN family reunification flight that ferries approved family members between the Polisario camps near Tindouf and Laayoune, Dakhla, and elsewhere in Moroccan-controlled territory. Each aircraft (which is leased from MINURSO on a fee for service basis) carries approximately 37 people (less when weather and temperatures dictate). The selection process for participation in the family unification visits is detailed and involves time-consuming verification steps. In 2004, the first list of approved beneficiaries was drawn up and was updated in December 2007 and January 2008. Five thousand people have participated in the program so far, but 30,000 individuals remain on the list.

Land Crossing: Higher Volume, Lower Cost

¶13. (C) Calle-Noreno and UNHCR believe the most affordable and efficient way to increase both the frequency of family unification visits and the number of participants is to encourage the three parties to cooperate on clearing a section of the berm dividing the territory to allow for land crossing via bus. Both sides of the berm are heavily mined. On the Moroccan side, up to 40 km west as far as Makhtbas would need to be demined and, on the Polisario side, up to 12 km east as far as the "border" with Algeria require demining. In addition to demining along the main roadway, clearing would be necessary up to 100 meters off each side of the road.

¶14. (C) Crossing by land would allow between 87 and 100 individuals to travel per busload at a fraction of the price of the current air exchange. The specially reinforced and modified buses necessary to traverse the terrain would represent a one-time cost of between USD 80,000 and 100,000, but annual operating outlays would be negligible in comparison to the aircraft usage fees.

Proposed Berm Breach Provokes Algerian Military Concerns

¶15. (C) Calle-Noreno acknowledged Algeria's concerns that dismantling part of the berm and demining at Kilometer 75 (the most geographically feasible spot to create a land crossing) would open an unprotected straight-line route to Tindouf from Morocco. For this reason, he said, the Algerian

Government considers demining a strategic threat and wants firm security assurances and practical mitigating measures. It will agree, according to Calle-Noreno, only if there is parallel dismantling and an agreed amount of artillery and heavy military equipment and a mutual draw down of troops on both the western and eastern sides of the line near the berm breach point.

Pieces in Place...

¶16. (C) In May, Calle-Noreno said he had gotten agreement from the three parties to meet in Geneva in July at UNHCR headquarters to resolve final issues and publicly sign an accord on the land crossings. However, recent tensions over statements by UN Special Representative Peter Van Walsum on the "realism" of Morocco's autonomy proposal and the Polisario's subsequent unofficial refusal to attend the next Manhasset round if Van Walsum is still in place led all sides to call a halt.

¶17. (C) In the past two months, through intensive "shuttle diplomacy" between Moroccan, Polisario and Algerian ministries and power brokers, he succeeded in obtaining tentative verbal agreements to resume the planning process and build towards a rescheduled Geneva conference, to be held from September 13-19 or 22-26.

¶18. (C) As part of his May round of negotiations, Calle-Noreno approached foreign embassies in Rabat to solicit financial and political support. He reported that the Nordic Countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway) all committed to funding demining. The German government offered to provide appropriate buses for transport as well demining services. The Dutch also offered buses and demining support. However, he is concerned that interest and commitments may evaporate if the land crossing initiative appears to be mired in Manhasset politics or far from an agreement.

...But Nudge Needed

¶9. (C) Calle-Norena requested USG assistance in urging Morocco and Algeria to support and move forward on the CBM initiative, particularly since no date has been set for Manhasset V. He felt that the U.S. was well positioned to push the Moroccans toward agreeing to meet in Geneva in September, and believed the USG could play a similarly useful role in Algiers. He said that framing the CBMs as a "humanitarian concern" rather than a political issue could help make it more palatable to the antagonists.

¶10. (C) Calle-Norena has discussed this issue extensively with the Moroccan regional Governor of Laayoune and Boujdour Mohammed Dryef, senior Polisario leadership, Moroccan Ministry of Interior (MOI) Director-General Mohiddine Amzazi (Deputy Secretary equivalent), MOI Governor Khalid Zerouali (Under Secretary equivalent), and Algerian MFA Director of Human Rights and General Political Affairs Lazhar Soualem. Amzazi gave him a tentative verbal agreement on the September Geneva meeting, but made public Moroccan commitment conditional on Calle-Noreno's obtaining firm commitments from Algiers and Tindouf. Calle-Noreno is currently in Algeria until August 12 attempting to firm up support there.

UNHCR Personnel Changes

¶11. (C) Calle-Norena also touched on upcoming personnel changes at UNHCR. He is scheduled to transfer out of his position in the fall and will be succeeded by Fatiha Sadi, a Sudanese national and Senior Nutritional Officer in Geneva. Her appointment is causing some concern in Rabat as she served with UNHCR in Tindouf from 2002 to 2004. Calle-Noreno said that some within the Moroccan Government see her as tainted as a result. His Moroccan interlocutors expressed their unhappiness to Chim and other UNHCR officials in Geneva but the Moroccan Government has not "yet" submitted a formal request for Sadi to not occupy her position.

Comment

¶12. (C) While Morocco does not oppose the CBM program, it certainly is not enthusiastic or committed to it. Comments from MFA and MOI officials lead us to believe that the GOM tolerates the program as the "cost of doing business" on the international stage, but would not consider it a loss if it ended or was curtailed. However, because Morocco is so conscious of its international image, it is loathe to appear obstructionist or uncooperative, and will not take actions in the humanitarian field that would make it appear so. The CBM program is one of the few current areas of success in the Western Sahara peace process. All three parties may be willing to move on this area to show their commitment to progress as a counterpoint to the perceived Manhasset stalemate. After appropriate consultations with the affected embassies and other actors, it might be productive for the Department to instruct Embassy Rabat and Algiers to approach their respective host governments and encourage support for this next phase of the CBM program. End Comment.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

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